

Podcast Episode 11: “The Denial of Death” by Ernest Becker

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Teaser

Hey everyone! Welcome to the new episode of the Life Extension Podcast – technology & magic, society & business. I am returning here to the subject of death, our fear of death, and to what lengths we are usually going to avoid the thought of our own death. This episode is for listeners who want to give some thought to the subject of death from an existentialist perspective, and how human psychology and culture have learned to cope with death. You will hear views from anthropology and psychoanalysis, and you might be even a bit surprised to hear about to which extent our personal and social worlds are interwoven with religion, science, magic, and other mythological beliefs, although we don't notice that most of the time.

In this episode I want to highlight a few fundamental strategies that humans are using to live their life without constantly being distracted by their own mortality. Thinking about those strategies may be quite illuminating in the context of our Life Extension Podcast. One of the most influential books about mortality and how it is influencing human culture is “The Denial of Death”, written by anthropologist Ernest Becker in 1973. Becker's starting point is existentialism, which has become a label of philosophical thought about the absurdity of the human condition. The existentialist world basically appears meaningless, while human individuals are subject to deep anxieties caused by their own mortality. Major proponents were among others Soren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre.

In his book Becker reinterprets the psychoanalytical toolbox of Sigmund Freud from the point of view of existentialism. Oedipal complex, anality, and castration fears during childhood are not connected anymore with sexuality, but with the anxieties caused by the fear of our mortality. Later in life character building, mental illnesses, transferences, and projections are used as strategies by the individual to cope with the existentialist predicament.

Becker called the existential paradox the “condition of individuality within finitude” (p26). Unlimited by space and time, the individual with his symbolic identity is able to imagine just about anything. But this exhilarating freedom of the mind is overshadowed by the terror of death and annihilation of the self.

From this rather depressive diagnosis of the human condition Becker develops the hero-system as a universal theory of human culture, with the main purpose to hide and deny the void of our existence, and to let us go on with our daily life. Narcissism, a need for self-esteem, and the fear of death are deep inner drives humans are born with. These are the fertile grounds of each individual's urge to develop a personal hero-system, to provide us with an illusionary sense of personal value and cosmic meaning.

I will let Becker speak for himself in the following quotes:

*“... The problem of heroics is the central one of human life, that it goes deeper into human nature than anything else because it is based on organismic narcissism and on the child’s need for self-esteem as **the** condition for his life.”*

The following is a quote by Becker about the religious nature of all social systems:

“Society itself is a codified hero-system, which means that society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning. Every society thus is a “religion” whether it thinks so or not: Soviet “religion” and Maoist “religion” are as truly religious as are scientific and consumer “religion”, no matter how much they may try to disguise themselves by omitting religious and spiritual ideas from their lives.” (p.7)

Now another quote about how individuals realize their own heroic projects by creating their own place in the mythologies of our societies:

“It doesn’t matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve, in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. They earn this feeling by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a skyscraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count.” (p. 5)

And here comes our final quote by Becker about how different characters are living out their personal heroism:

“...Human heroics is a blind drivenness that burns people up; in passionate people, a screaming for glory as uncritical and reflexive as the howling of a dog. In the more passive masses of mediocre men it is disguised as they humbly and complainingly follow out the roles that society provides for their heroics and try to earn their promotions within the system: wearing the standard uniforms – but allowing themselves to stick out, but ever so little and so safely, with a little ribbon or a red boutonniere, but not with head and shoulders.” (p6)

Over time, the type of hero-system people chose needed to adapt to changes in society. In traditional society the hero-system was predefined for individuals to serve god as their higher meaning, while the afterlife was safely taken care of. In that invisible world of magic, a belief in immortality was built into the system. With regards to coping with the fear of death, that traditional worldview was much more comfortable than modernity. Instead of serving god’s will modern individuals needed to live out their fictions of primary heroism in more secular terms, and they learned to live their dreams of significant

action in their everyday life through new hero systems. Platforms where this could be played out was mainly consumerism, but also the scientific worldview, with science replacing traditional religion as the place of magic and wonder.

The ideas of Becker about how we are avoiding constant terror of ultimate death through cultural constructions are very influential. As an example, the sociologist Zygmunt Baumann has written a book about the same subject (Baumann 1992). His main argument, which uses Becker's Denial of Death as its starting point, is that in modern times, mortality is being deconstructed by identifying causes of death as avoidable behaviors or curable diseases. The health sector is building hope to overcome such causes and to manage mortality through science and opaque medical procedures. An ever more advanced medicine acts as powerful psychological factor of reassurance against the terror of death, although it doesn't solve death at all – in the best case, the moment of death is just delayed a little. The mysterious complexity of science always appears to the non-scientist somewhat magical. One could ask, if the market of popularized science magazines does not consist entirely of modern spiritual seekers.

Instead of patiently waiting till the end of our life and then hopefully go to heaven, modern humans have shifted to continuously manage the material problem of death in small slices throughout the duration of our life. We seek and obtain reassurance from the health sector that our mortality is professionally taken care of. In this way everybody tries to ignore death as long as possible, which demonstrates nicely how society builds institutions of magical practice and mythological beliefs to accommodate personal hero-systems for the denial of death. When an individual is threatened by death through disease, treatment is shaped and experienced through an enormously complex and costly health system. Often medical procedures of treatment offer to the patient a ready-made mold for another personal hero-system through active participation.

Becker's theory that society creates mythologies to accommodate personal hero-systems of its individual members in the purpose to suppress our fear of death is quite powerful and could be used to interpret various worldviews. For example, the modern worldview, within which Becker lived and wrote, was based on grand universal ideas, which made the seeking out of a personal hero system relatively straight forward, like fighting for the nation or another grand idea, or of course gaining wealth. The cultural fragmentation process of postmodern life, however, with an increased focus on the relativity of values, made things much more difficult. The problem is that in a highly fragmented world, in particular when it became digitalized, most individuals struggle to attract attention and at times feel quite lonely in their personal hero-system. Luckily, identity politics and a focus on diversity came to the rescue of the postmodern urban subject, providing new heroic causes. At last, in the narrative of posthuman culture the potential for heroic action within larger schemes appears to grow considerably, as new opportunities are again presented to save the world, this time from humanity itself. Such larger schemes of heroic action are for example environmentalism or transhumanism, both offering grand hero-systems for the denial of death.

Bibliography

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Baumann, Zygmunt. 1992. Mortality, Immortality & Other Life Strategies. Cambridge: Polity Press